

# Election in Germany

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Chancellor Angela Merkel is seeking a fourth term in Germany's parliamentary election scheduled for September 24, 2017. Merkel has led Europe's largest and most prosperous country for 12 years and is widely viewed as the most influential political leader in Europe. [Opinion polls](#) suggest she will be reelected comfortably.

Merkel's campaign has stressed the value of continuity and predictability during a time of flux in Europe and beyond. While presiding over a period of economic prosperity in Germany, Merkel has been confronted with crises such as significant migration and refugee flows, Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Greek debt crisis, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (EU), and a rise in terrorism.

Within Germany, the arrival of approximately [1.1 million refugees and migrants](#) in 2015 created considerable pressure for Merkel. Perhaps most notable has been the rise of an anti-immigrant party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is poised to become the first far-right party represented in Germany's federal parliament since World War II. Nevertheless, more than 60% of German voters [express support for Merkel's leadership](#) and moderate sensibilities.

Regardless of the outcome, analysts do not expect a significant shift in Germany's foreign policy. The leading parties are generally supportive of Merkel's policies on the EU, NATO, and international cooperation. Despite near universal criticism of U.S. President Donald Trump across Germany's political spectrum, the major political parties emphasize the need to maintain a strong, cooperative relationship with the United States.

## Main Political Parties and Key Election Issues

[Polls indicate](#) that the following six political parties will surpass the 5% vote threshold required for entry into the lower house of the German parliament, the *Bundestag*:

- **Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), 36%.** Chancellor Merkel's center-right political group of the CDU and its Bavarian sister-party, the CSU.
- **Social Democratic Party (SPD), 22%.** Center-left party led by former president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz.
- **Alternative for Germany (AfD), 11%.** Far-right, anti-immigrant party.
- **The Left, 10%.** Far-left party that is an outgrowth of East Germany's former ruling communist party.
- **The Free Democratic Party (FDP), 9%.** Economically and socially liberal party that has traditionally been a coalition partner of the CDU/CSU.

- **The Greens, 8%.** Left-leaning party, with a focus on environmental issues.

In the eyes of most observers, the 2017 campaign—dubbed the “sleep campaign”—has been most notable for its lack of contentiousness. Analysts attribute this to Germany’s relatively strong economic standing and broad voter support of Merkel’s leadership. Despite the emergence of the AfD, Merkel has largely subdued criticism of her response to the refugee and migration crisis with policies focused on reducing refugee and migration flows (in part through a controversial [EU deal with Turkey](#)) and hastening the return of failed asylum seekers. The number of new arrivals to Germany has [dropped substantially](#) since 2015.

Some analysts observe that during Merkel’s tenure, Germany’s two main parties—the CDU/CSU and the SPD—have increasingly converged around the political center, emboldening smaller parties on the left and right. The entry into parliament of the AfD, for example, could make coalition building more challenging and heighten political instability, a trend also observed in some other European countries. On the other hand, the German electorate is viewed as one of Europe’s [most politically moderate](#).

## Possible Electoral Outcomes

In Germany, as in other parliamentary democracies, the head of government is elected by the parliament. Due to the number of parties represented in parliament, leading parties rarely enjoy an absolute majority, so a chancellor is almost always elected by two or more parties that then form a governing coalition. Merkel has spent two terms governing in a so-called “grand coalition” together with her party’s long-time adversary, the SPD (2005-2009 and 2013-2017), and one term governing with the FDP (2009-2013).

Polls suggest that the combined support for the CDU/CSU and its traditional coalition partner, the FDP, will not exceed 50%. Analysts therefore expect Merkel to seek [one of two possible governing arrangements](#): another “grand coalition” with the SPD, or a coalition of three parties—the CDU/CSU, the FDP, and the Greens.

Many observers believe Merkel’s preference to be a “grand coalition,” both due to her past success governing with the SPD and her centrist preferences. However, some leading voices in the SPD say they [oppose joining another CDU/CSU-led government](#), arguing that the arrangement has caused the SPD to stray from its core values.

Postwar Germany has never been governed by a coalition of three parties. Many observers view the CDU/CSU and the Greens as unlikely partners, although they have coalesced at the state level. Some analysts also maintain that the famously cautious Merkel could view the unprecedented arrangement as too risky.

## Implications for the United States

Although Chancellor Merkel is considered a steadfast supporter of strong U.S.-German ties, the bilateral relationship has been strained since the election of U.S. President Donald Trump. The two leaders have openly disagreed on several key issues, including climate change, free trade, and migration. In response to President Trump’s [past criticisms](#) of NATO and the EU, Merkel has stressed her belief that U.S.-German relations should continue to be based on a strong mutual commitment to these pillars of the multilateral architecture developed after World War II.

During the campaign, Merkel garnered attention for declaring that the days when Europe could rely on others “[were over to a certain extent](#),” a comment widely viewed as questioning the reliability of the United States. However, Merkel and Trump have both stressed their commitment to strong bilateral cooperation on key international concerns, such as the fight against the Islamic State and confronting Russian aggression.

Merkel also agrees with President Trump that NATO’s European members should increase defense spending to ensure more equitable burden-sharing. Merkel has committed to raising Germany’s defense spending—currently at about 1.2% of GDP—to 2% of GDP by 2024, as agreed by NATO. Her main challenger, Schulz, has argued against such an increase on the grounds that it could lead to a “new arms race.”

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